

Restriction on Internet Freedom by the Junta



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Following the military coup on February 1, the fundamental human rights which are freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and media freedom, including internet freedom of Myanmar people, are adversely oppressed. According to the “Freedom on the Net” report by the Freedom House issued in 2021, Myanmar ranks the lowest at the internet freedom, limiting internet rights at the widest pace and the largest extent. Three factors are considered in assessing the internet freedom: (1) Obstacles to access, (2) Limits on content, (3) Violations of user rights.¹ As of the 2021 “Freedom on the Net” report jointly published by the Freedom House and the Free Expression Myanmar, internet freedom of Myanmar declined successively in the last four years and scored only 17 out of 100 in the year 2021.

(1) Obstacles to access

The first regular session of the third Pyithu Hluttaw after the 2020 Election was scheduled to convene on February 1. However, Myanmar military soldiers raided the Centers of internet providers and ordered to shut down nationwide internet services, threatening with their guns at around midnight, hours before the coup, on February 1.² On February 1 morning, all internet access, mobile phone networks, radio channels, and television channels were disrupted, apart from the military owned Myawaddy television channel. Although the internet access and phone networks were restored on that afternoon, the internet access was blocked nationwide again for about 30 hours from February 6 to 7. The internet access, which was previously suspended for around two years to conceal the military’s human rights

¹ Freedom House. (2021). “Freedom House report finds global internet freedom in decline for the 11th consecutive year”. Available at [Freedom House report finds global internet freedom in decline for the 11th consecutive year - IFEX](#)

² Januta, Andrea and Minami Funakoshi. (2021, April 7). “Myanmar internet suppression”. Available at [Myanmar’s internet suppression \(reuters.com\)](#)



abuses in Rakhine State, was restored through 4G mobile access in some townships of Rakhine State on February 3.

From February 14, the internet access through Wireless Wi-Fi, fiber internets and mobile networks were shut down, lasting from 1 a.m. to 9 a.m. till February 15. The nationwide shutdown of mobile internet was commenced on February 15, 1 a.m., lasting for one and half months until April 28.³ The junta intended to lessen the anti-coup protest activities via internet disruption.

On March 30, the Bago City Development Committee ordered telecommunications companies to disclose the information about the subscribers, listing the addresses together with the name of the users, to identify who were having internet and Wi-Fi services within their territory.⁴ Although the internet services were restored in May, users are still bypassing with Virtual Privat Network called VPN as most of the websites including Facebook, are still being blocked.

Issuing whitelists

In May, the military's junta restricted the online services, domains, and websites by developing a list called whitelist. The first exemption on the list are Mobile-banking related applications.⁵ Although Tinder, We Chat, Grab, WhatsApp, and Instagram⁶ were included on

³ Article 19. (2021). “*Unplugged in Myanmar, internet restrictions following the military coup*”. Available at ([Unplugged in Myanmar, “Internet restrictions following the military coup”, 9 July 2021, Article 19.](#))

⁴ (2021, March 30). “*ပဲခူးတိုင်းတွင် Wi-Fi တပ်ဆင်ထားသည့် နေအိမ်များ စစ်ကောင်စီ စာရင်းတောင်း*” Available at <https://www.facebook.com/News.TheLadies/photos/a.179109772264000/1759830354191926/?type=3>

⁵ Frontier. (2021, June 30). “*Whitelisted internet takes Myanmar back to a ‘dark age’*”. Available at <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/whitelisted-internet-takes-myanmar-back-to-a-dark-age/>

⁶ Wallace, Rory. (2021, April 28). “*Myanmar junta builds ‘walled garden’ of internet services*”. Available at [Myanmar junta builds 'walled garden' of internet services - Nikkei Asia](#)



the whitelist, conspicuously excluding Facebook, Twitter, and Wikipedia. Over 300 business-oriented applications, about 60 entertainment and gaming sites, and around ten education-related internet services⁷ were permitted, though thousands of websites and applications were banned, including Wikipedia.

In June, the junta-run Ministry of Transport and Communications ordered telecommunications companies to monitor websites that users visited heavily and to follow the order of their Whitelist plan.⁸

The draft cybersecurity law imposing more repression on the internet freedom

The junta's Ministry of Transport and Communications asked mobile operators and telecommunications license holders' feedback on a draft Cybersecurity Law that is totally against the democracy standards on February 9. That draft law, which is likely to oppress more on digital freedom, includes the facts that are not compliant with the international standards. The law consists of (1) military authority to absolute control over the internet; (2) having full access to the personal data of users by the authority; (3) full command on the internet and the mobile phone lines; and (4) those who failed to comply with this law shall be punished for a three-year term, and a fine.⁹

Abrupt disruption of the internet when the NUG's press conference was going to be held

There was another nationwide internet shutdown by the junta when the National Unity Government (NUG) was holding a second online press conference at 5 p.m. of June 4. Staff

⁷ Chen, Estey. (2021, September 02). "*Months after coup, Myanmar accelerates toward surveillance state*". Available at [Months After Coup, Myanmar Accelerates Toward Surveillance State – The Diplomat](#)

⁸ Frontier. (2021, June 30). "*Whitelisted internet takes Myanmar back to a 'dark age'*". Available at <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/whitelisted-internet-takes-myanmar-back-to-a-dark-age/>

⁹ Asia Center. (2021). "*Myanmar Dismantling Dissent Crackdowns on Internet Freedom*". Available at [Myanmar-Dismantling-Dissent-Crackdowns-on-Internet-Freedoms.pdf](#)



from anonymous telecommunications company reported to RFA that the junta directed to shut down all internet services for an hour.

Regional internet shutdowns

When armed revolution became a mandatory choice to secure the public freedom after the military raids, arrests, and killings of public protests, People Defense Forces (PDFs) emerged in the respective regions across the country, including the flat areas of the mid-Myanmar. The internet connections were particularly cut in certain areas, where there were firefights between the local PDFs and the junta forces.

From August 20 to November 3, the junta shut down the internet in 30 townships. These include 13 townships from Sagaing Region, nine townships from Chin State, four from Magway Region, and two from Mandalay Region and Kachin State respectively.

The internet in Hpakant township of Kachin State, had been shut down starting from August 20 till the present while writing this report.¹⁰ The information flow is being compromised due to the internet shutdowns, exerting adverse socio-economic impacts on the local community. It was reported that some local people in Hpakant township were arrested at night while the internet had been shut down. The internet at Long Khin and Hawng Par villages near Hpakant, was also cut off.

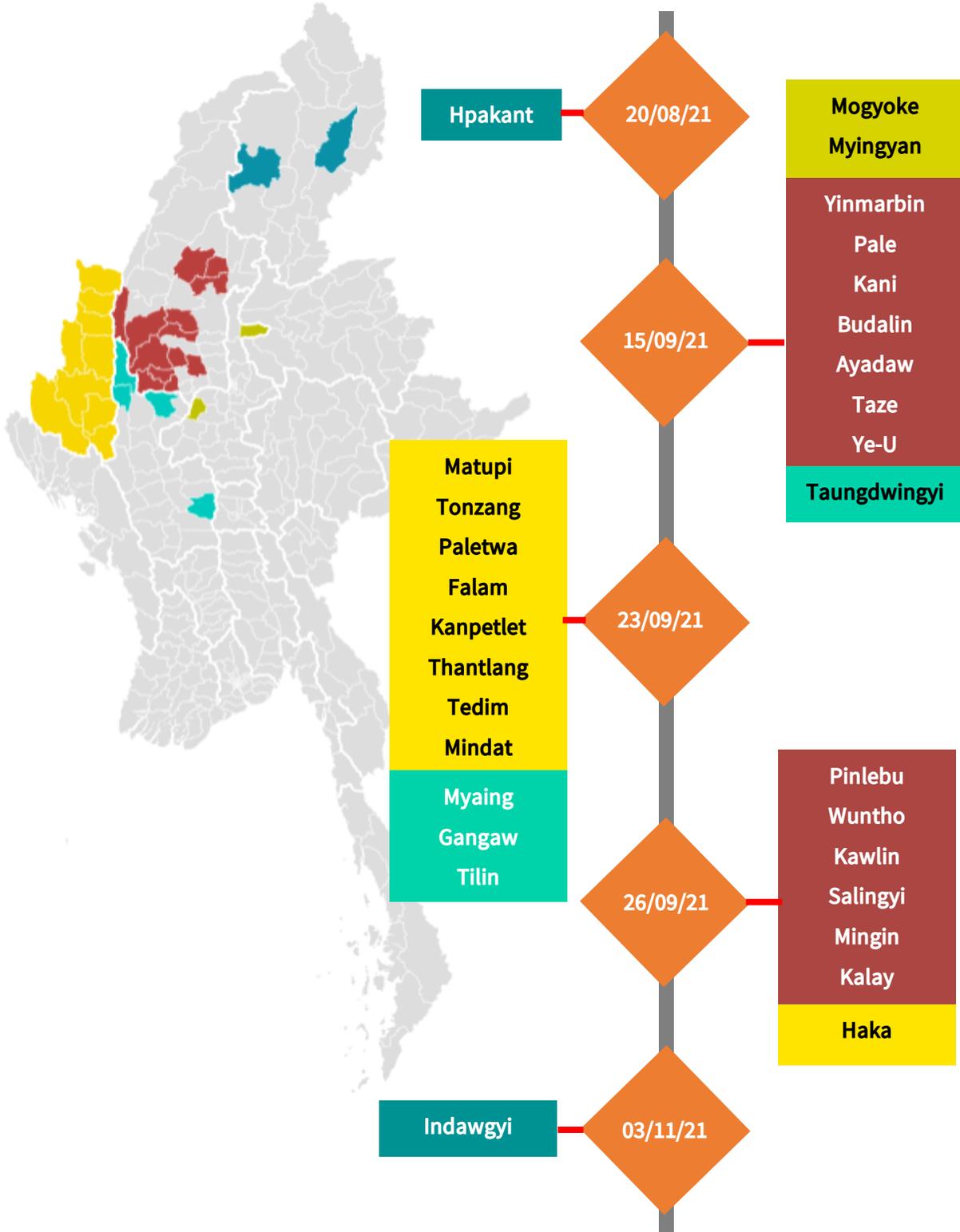
Later, the internet in Sagaing Region, Magway Region, Mandalay Region, and Chin State, where the clashes between the junta’s military and the local PDFs became intense, were cut off. In addition to poor internet access, there were difficulties in communicating via phone lines in some places. As of the interview update from a resident in Kani of Sagaing Region to the RFA on September 15, it was said that “the phone lines are pretty poor and have to dial

¹⁰ (2021, August 24). “ဖားကန့်မှာ အင်တာနက်ဖြတ်၊ လုံခြုံရေးပိုတင်းကျပ်” Available at https://web.facebook.com/39218993127/posts/10161318892228128?_rdc=1&_rdr



Townships under the internet shutdowns

Chin Kachin Magway Mandalay Sagaing





two or more times to make a single call. Even if the call is made, it is relatively hard to catch well due to the bad connection. It is troublesome to call in urgent cases. Since the access to transportation is already limited in this place, the internet and phone lines are not working now”¹¹.

Furthermore, it was said that the junta threatened 15 villages that opposed them to relocate by distributing the propaganda leaflets in Ayadaw of Sagaing Region, where the internet was cut off.¹² In Myingyan District of Mandalay Region, the junta raided villages, arresting and torturing villager after shutting down the internet.¹³

(2) Limits on content (Restricting the contents or expressions of the internet users)

On February 13, the junta blocked the websites of 30 local news media, including Justice for Myanmar website, and the software of the information sharing chatbot about COVID-19.¹⁴ According to Telenor’s public reports, the access to internet protocol (IP) addresses and URLs were blocked starting from February 9 and consecutively on February 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14.¹⁵

¹¹ (2021, September 20). “အင်တာနက်လှိုင်း ဖြတ်ခံထားရတဲ့ ကနီမြို့နယ်မှာ ဖုန်းလှိုင်းပါ ဆက်သွယ်ရ ခက်ခဲ”. Available at https://web.facebook.com/39218993127/posts/10161371360403128?_rdc=1&_rdr

¹² (2021, September 19). “အင်တာနက် ဖြတ်ထားတဲ့ အရာတော်က ရွာတချို့ကို ကိုယ့်အိမ်ကိုယ်ဖျက်ပြီး ရွှေ့ပြောင်းရမယ်လို့ စစ်ကောင်စီ သတင်းလွှင့်”. Available at https://web.facebook.com/278607422252157/posts/4277796662333193?_rdc=1&_rdr

¹³ (2021, September 16). “မြင်းခြံတွင် အင်တာနက် ဖြတ်ပြီးနောက် ကျေးရွာများကို စစ်ကောင်စီတပ်များ ဝင်စီးပြီး ပြည်သူများကို အကြမ်းဖက် ရိုက်နှက် ညှဉ်းပန်း ဖမ်းဆီးနေ”. Available at https://web.facebook.com/khitthitnews/photos/a.386800725090613/1298949120542431/?type=3&_rdc=1&_rdr

¹⁴ Januta, Andrea and Minami Funakoshi. (2021, April 7). “Myanmar internet suppression”. Available at [Myanmar’s internet suppression \(reuters.com\)](https://www.reuters.com/technology/myanmar-internet-suppression-2021-04-07/)

¹⁵ Telenor Group. (2021). “Directives from authorities in Myanmar- February- November 2021”. Available at [Directives from authorities in Myanmar - February-November 2021 - Telenor Group](https://www.telenor.com/global/press-releases/2021/02/directives-from-authorities-in-myanmar-february-november-2021)



On February 4, the military-controlled Ministry of Transport and Communications issued an order to block Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Messenger for four days by mobile service providers, international gateway managers, and internet service providers (ISPs).¹⁶ Although the block of Facebook was temporarily for four days as stated in the order, the social media users have to use Facebook via VPNs as the restriction is continued till November, 10-month after the coup.

Repressing the media freedom

Since the coup, the junta excessively violated media freedom. On February 2, the Ministry of Information under the military junta released Order No (1/2021) stating to avoid the spread of rumors and statements that could impose riot and unstable situations on social media and suggest media organizations cooperate with the government in compliance with the existing laws. The publishing licenses of independent media companies – DVB, Mizzima, Khit Thit Media, Myanmar Now, and 7 Days, were revoked by the military-run Ministry of Information on March 8.¹⁷ Later, the license of Tachileik Media was revoked on April 20 and those of Myitkyina Media and the 74 Media on April 29 and that of Delta News Agency on October 4 respectively.

Some journalists and media workers had been detained and charged under Section 505(A), 505(B), and 505(C) of Penal Code, including violations of existing laws and curfew. Similarly, some journalists were enlisted on a warrant under Section 505(A) of Penal Code and Article 66(D) of the Telecommunications Law.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Athan. (2021). “*Dictatorship Oppresses Media Freedom*”.

¹⁸ Ibid.



(3) Violations of User Rights

Campaigns condemning military coups were conducted widely, not only on the ground but also online. The junta oppressed protesters not only by shutting down the internet but also by checking the phones of social media users and charging those uploaded posts about anti-regime. Prominent social media users – including actors, poets, artists, musicians, and social influencers who posted against the military junta, were detained with a charge under Section 505(A) of the Penal Code. Furthermore, the government staff who joined Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) were detained and charged under Section 505(A) and 505(B) of Penal Code, and Section 52(A) of the Counter-Terrorism Law for persuading others to get involved in CDM through messenger.¹⁹

Arrest of four youths due to the change of their Facebook profiles with the NUG frame

The junta ordered to make proper documentation of people who changed their profiles with the “Accept NUG-Reject Military” frame on Facebook social media, on August 11. Four youths from Thlangpang Village in Matupi Township of Chin State were arrested for updating their profiles with NUG frame during an online public campaign addressing the UN to acknowledge the NUG. They were charged under Section 52(A) of the Counter-Terrorism Law and then freed at 6 p.m., August 20.²⁰

Freezing Kpay accounts and arresting users

Due to internet services shutdowns since the military’s coup, financial services were in the most difficult state, and freezing of the accounts of mobile banking users was also in place. Since the military regime, withdrawal of money from banks were annoying and online

¹⁹ (2021, March 5). “Facebook ပေါ်မှာ CDM လှုံ့ဆော်မှု စွပ်စွဲချက်နဲ့ နိုင်ငံခြားရေးဝန်ထမ်းတွေ တရားစွဲခံထားရ”.
Available at https://web.facebook.com/rfaburmese/posts/10160887037583128?_rdc=1&_rdr

²⁰ Kho Nong Thone. (2021, August 31). “NUG ပရိုဖိုင်းသုံးထားခြင်းကြောင့် ချင်းလူငယ် ၄ ဦးကို စစ်ကောင်စီ အမှုဖွင့်”.
Available at <https://www.bnionline.net/mm/news-84033>



payment system has been relied for cash transfers. The Kpay accounts with high cash flows were monitored and frozen by the junta in cooperation with banks. It was reported that various accounts were blocked, as an example, the Kpay account of the CDM support committee of Dawei University in Tanintharyi Region used for funding was locked.²¹ Moreover, three residents from Tabayin township of Shwe Bo District in Sagaing Region were arrested and charged under Section 50(J) of the Counter-Terrorism Law for allegedly supporting PDF on September 3.²²

Mytel's monopoly

The operator Mytel which is a consortium of Myanmar military and Vietnamese Ministry of Defense on January 12 of 2017 is one of the main economic pillars providing massive profits to the junta. Since the February coup, Myanmar people began to boycott the military-own businesses, including Mytel. Telenor planned to sell its shares and leave the country as the junta asked telecommunications companies in Myanmar to install interception spyware that could intercept the personal communications²³ which is against the international human rights standards.

While users of Ooredoo, Telenor, and MPT have to use a VPN in accessing Facebook, Wikipedia, and other websites and software, Mytel monopolizes the local

²¹ (2021, September 14). “ထားဝယ်တက္ကသိုလ်က ထောက်ပံ့ရေးအလှူခံနေသည့် Kpay အကောင့် ပိတ်ခံရ”. Available at <http://burmese.dvb.no/archives/487589>

²² Shwe Phone Myat San. (2021, September 3). “KBZ Pay နဲ့ Wave Pay ကိစ္စတွေကြောင့် ဒီပဲယင်းနယ်မှာ လူ့ဥစ္စာ အဖမ်းခံထားရ”. Available at <https://voiceofmyanmarnews.com/news/2021/09/03/kbz-pay-%E1%80%94%E1%80%B2%E1%80%B7-wave-pay-%E1%80%84%E1%80BD%E1%80%B1%E1%80%9C%E1%80BD%E1%80BE%E1%80B2%E1%80%80%E1%80AD%E1%80%85%E1%80B9%E1%80%85%E1%80%80%E1%80BC%E1%80B1%E1%80AC%E1%80%84/>

²³ Irrawaddy. (2021, September 15). “မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် ဆက်ရှိနေရေး မဖြစ်နိုင်ဟု တယ်လီနော ကြေညာ”. Available at <https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/short-news/2021/09/15/246021.html>



telecommunications market through the provision of those services. For instance, the services included enabling users accessible these banned sites without VPN, selling sim cards at a low price and installing Wacky Jacky game (which can be played eight times per day for free), conducting promotion by providing a bonus to sales staff, and setting the internet package of 999 MMK for 9GB. However, as of the statement from the Justice for Myanmar, there were a financial loss of at least USD 24.9 million and the loss of customer more than 2 million from February to April, resulting from the strong ongoing boycott against the military group and related business products till now.²⁴

Since the coup, Myanmar people faced the worst violations in freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, media freedom, and internet freedom during the past decade. The limited access to information due to the internet shutdown and telecommunications cut off imposed adverse socioeconomic impacts on the daily life of the residents. Besides, people in areas where the internet is still accessible spend every day in uncertain darkness fearing further internet shutdown.

Research Methodology

This research paper reviewed the previously published research works, reports, and statements. Information and events from the online news media were monitored and documented daily. Regarding the study of internet freedom, three factors from the Freedom House, i.e., (1) Obstacles to access, (2) Limits on content, (3) Violations of user rights, were taken as reference.

²⁴ Justice for Myanmar. (2021, November 5). “အာဏာသိမ်းရန် ကြိုးပမ်းမှုနှင့် သပိတ်မှောက်မှုကြောင့် သုံးလအတွင်း ဒေါ်လာ ၂၄.၉ သန်း မိုင်တဲလ် ထိခိုက်”. Available at [အာဏာသိမ်းရန် ကြိုးပမ်းမှုနှင့်... - Justice For Myanmar | Facebook](#)

